



Teaching British Culture, History and Literature with a WebQuest

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Abstract: WebQuests are a distinct exemplar of the great “*range of computer technologies that can be harnessed for language teaching and learning.*” (Garrette, 2009: 719). The advancements in technology aid teachers “demolish” classroom walls and bring the real world into the teaching procedure, transforming learners into *knowledge constructors* (Grant, 2002) and *active participants* in the learning process (Levy, 1997). This article presents thus the utilization of an original WebQuest based on Charles Dickens’ masterpiece “Oliver Twist” created by the writer in order to teach British history, culture and literature to a class of ten-year-old students in a Greek primary school. The three constructivistic lessons based on it, aim not only at enriching students’ *schemata* about Charles Dickens, the novel “Oliver Twist” and the historic era presented in it but also at promoting students’ research skills, socio-cultural competence and active involvement.

Keywords: *WebQuest, research skills, socio-cultural competence, historic knowledge, literary awareness.*

Apstrakt: „WebQuest” je izrazit primer širokog “spektrara računarskih tehnologija koje se mogu iskoristiti za podučavanje i učenje jezika,” (Garet, 2009;719). Napredak tehnologije pomaže nastavnicima da “sruše” zidove učionica i uvedu pravi svet u svoje nastavne postupke preobražavajući učenike u *konstruktore znanja* (Grant, 2002) i *aktivne učesnike* u procesu učenja (Levi, 1977). Ovaj rad prikazuje korišćenje originalnog „WebQuest”-a zasnovanog na remek delu Čarlsa Dikensa „Oliver Tvist” koji je autorka napravila kako bi podučavala odeljenje desetogodišnjaka u osnovnog školi u Grčkoj o britanskoj istoriji, kulturi i literaturi. Tri konstruktivističke lekcije su zasnovane na ovome i imale su za cilj ne samo da obogate konceptualnu šemu učenika po pitanju Čarlsa Dikensa, romana „Oliver Tvist” i istorijske epohe predstavljene u njemu, već i da pospeši istraživačke veštine učenika, društveno-kulturološku kompetenciju i aktivno učešće učenika.

Ključne reči: *WebQuest, istraživačke veštine, društveno-kulturološka kompetencija, poznavanje istorije i svest o značaju književnosti*

1. WebQuests¹ in the ELT classroom

When Dodge Bernie first introduced the WebQuest technique in 1995, he could probably not imagine how popular and influential his new tool would become. Since then many teachers worldwide have integrated this real, rich and relevant method (March, 2005) in their classrooms to transform their learners from passive recipients of knowledge (Berge & Collins, 1995) to active protagonists (Abbit & Ophus, 2008), digital natives (Agolli, 2011) and autonomous investigators (Lee, 2000).

According to their creator, a WebQuest is “an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all the information learners interact with comes from resources on the internet” (Dodge, 1995: 10). He divided WebQuests into two distinct categories: *the short-term WebQuest* that should be completed in one to three teaching hours and the *long-term WebQuest* designed to be completed from one week to one month. What is interesting though concerning WebQuests is that they are not a simple internet-based teaching tool. On the contrary, they are a multi-layered platform consisting of five different sections; (i) **the introduction** which introduces the topic and activates students’ schemata about it, (ii) **the task**

that describes the problem or the assignment students need to deal with, (iii) **the process** which illuminates the course of action students should undergo to fulfill the task, (iv) **the evaluation**, comprising all the material necessary for the evaluation of students’ performance during the WebQuest procedure and (v) **the conclusion** which apart from closing the WebQuest, it serves as a reminder of what students have learned and offers optional research material. All the aforementioned sections can be supplemented with videos, songs, handouts and other documents to facilitate students’ learning. Simply put, WebQuests consist of authentic tasks, allowing students to analyze internet resources in order to enhance their understanding about an abundance of topics (Schweizer & Kossow, 2007) through the creation of various products.

A handful of researchers have accentuated the merits of WebQuests. The most obvious advantage is that they insert technology into learning and teaching (Abbit & Ophus, 2008). Moreover, they can serve as tools of *differentiated teaching* (Schweizer & Kossow, 2007). Taking into consideration that students differ in experiences, cognitive level, cultural origin, motivation, learning styles and gender (Tomlinson,

¹ WebQuests can be created with the aid of various online templates. One of the most popular is zunal.com, which was used for the creation of the WebQuest presented in this article.

1999), WebQuests allow students to utilize these differences for their own benefit.

Undoubtedly, WebQuests are a learner-centered tool (March, 2005), since teachers quit their role as information providers and become guides of students' efforts. During this motivating learning experience (Lipscomb, 2003), students are able to advance their critical skills, as they are asked to combine their background knowledge with the new knowledge to complete synthetic tasks (March, 1998). Furthermore, WebQuests offer the possibility for collaborative work, enhancing thus all those social skills that students need both inside and outside the classroom (Gaskill, McNulty & Brooks, 2006). It must be stressed that they also promote contextualized learning (Viddoni & Maddux, 2002), enabling learners to raise their metacognitive processes (March, 2003).

2. Literature and culture in the ELT classroom

Teaching a foreign language is more than the mere presentation of grammatical, syntactic and lexical facts. It should also be an in-depth analysis of its culture, not only as this is expressed in customs and national holidays but also as this is presented in literature.

A great number of educational researchers have investigated the

beneficial role of literature in L2 classrooms. According to them, literature boosts students creativity (Preston, 1982), exposes learners to contextualized authentic language (Liaw, 2001), provokes critical thinking (Oster, 1989), promotes tolerance of diversity (Mc Kay, 1982), develops learners' self-realization (Bettelheim, 1986), fosters the growth of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and facilitates the integration of the four skills and their macro skills (Ghosn, 2002). The fore mentioned advantages in favor of the use of literary texts in L2 instruction could be summarized in the following phrase: *"Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language."* (Bassnet & Grundy, 1993: 7).

Accordingly, educationalists have also acknowledged the interwoven relationship of culture and language. For instance, Tang's (1999) declaration that language is culture and culture is language summarizes this strong interdependence (Kramsch, 1998) and stresses their 'keystone' connection to the ELT classroom (Brown, 2000). It becomes clear that literary texts and their cultural wealth should be indispensable parts of English language teaching efforts.

3. The teaching aims underlying the utilization of the 'Oliver Twist' WebQuest²

This technologically-oriented lesson is based on a short term WebQuest. It is a multidimensional learning experience, connecting literature to the historical and social aspects of the Victorian Era.

Its main aim is to bring students into contact with the literary work of Charles Dickens and its era, through the adventures of his popular hero, Oliver Twist. The utilization of two film adaptations of the specific novel fulfills the assumption that to really know a language means to be able to deal not only with restaurant menus but also with novels (Zyngier, 1994). The main goal of the lesson is thus to utilize literature as a change agent through which children achieve personal growth, by sympathizing with the hardships of a Victorian boy. *Literary awareness* is accompanied by *cultural awareness*, social reflection and a deeper understanding of British historical events.

Apart from the humanistic aim of personal development, students are also given adequate opportunities to practice the four skills for communicative purposes. The WebQuest is enriched with material aiming at stimulating both the productive and receptive skills. Despite seeming

writing-oriented at first glance, it is highly interactive.

4. The methodological presentation of the lesson

The specific short-term WebQuest is designed to be completed in three teaching hours with an estimated additional time of three hours assigned to homework tasks. It is entitled "Oliver Twist: The great Dickensian hero". Following Au and Raphael's' advice (2000) that literary texts should be age and level appropriate, the writer-teacher selected the specific novel, convinced that the students would sympathize with the adventures of a child at their age.

It is strongly believed that students' contact with literature, either in written or visualized form, should be an interactive process with its content (Ali, 1994). The learners should therefore be encouraged to bring their personal experiences and beliefs while dealing with literature and become "*independent makers of meaning*" (Amer, 2003: 68). This process of *multiple interpretations* (Rosenblatt, 1995) develops students' creativity and critical thinking and promotes language skills (Kim, 2003).

The specific WebQuest echoes the assumptions of three methodological orientations. By giving emphasis to two basic episodes of Oliver Twist, the teacher conceptualizes the theory of *Story*

² The WebQuest, as well as all the supplementary material can be viewed on the following [link](#).

Grammar which focuses on the description of the setting, characters, problem, action, events and resolution of specific scenes (Cooper, 1986). Moreover, the WebQuest level of linguistic difficulty follows Krashen's *i+1 Comprehensible Input Hypothesis* (1982), as it is slightly above learners' language level. Finally, the selection of the tasks echoes Swain's *Comprehensible Output Hypothesis* (1985) which claims that acquisition is more likely to occur when learners produce spoken and written language.

To be more precise, the three WebQuest lessons are organized under the pre-while-post teaching framework to ensure students' active involvement in the learning procedure. The following brief description of the technologically-oriented literary lessons obey to the ideas of both the *cultural* and *language models* of teaching literature (Carter & Long, 1991), as emphasis is cast both on the socio-cultural attitudes of the literary heroes and the way that these are expressed through language.

Lesson 1 brings students into contact with Charles Dickens' life to help them gain a deeper understanding of the autobiographical elements reflected in his work. The *Warm-up* stage consists of a thought-provoking *brainstorming activity*, aiming to activate students' *background knowledge* (Kang, 2004) about the famous writer. For the *Pre* stage the students

watch a short cartoon³ (2010) about Dickens' life to complete a table of bibliographical information, as "*a very high proportion of all sensory learning, is visual*" (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997: 287). Furthermore, the *While* stage includes three activities that the students need to complete after watching the cartoon for a second time and reading its transcription. Despite successfully integrating the four skills, this phase is mostly linguistically oriented, as it focuses on lexical acquisition and Simple Past Tense revision. Additionally, the *Post* stage engages students in a role-play activity that students need to prepare, using the new schemata they created during this lesson. They have to create a fictional interview between a journalist and Charles Dickens and then act it out in the classroom. The integration of this role-play aims at improving language and promoting students' appreciation of literature (Norwick, 1995). Lastly, the *Follow-up* stage practically applies the *discovery technique*, as students research certain sites to learn more about Charles Dickens' life.

Lesson 2 introduces the novel "Oliver Twist" to learners. A brainstorming activity is utilized once again in the *Warm-up* phase to present the topic and attract learners' interest. The *Pre* stage realizes the notion of *cross-linking* by engaging

³ The cartoon can be found in this [link](#)

learners in an *inference process*. Students watch the first four minutes from BBC Oliver Twist episode 1 (Giedroyc & Dickens, 2007) and are asked to predict whether Oliver will have an easy life. They are thus asked to “*read with the eye of the mind*” (Zyngier, Fialho & Rios, 2007: 196). Furthermore, the *While* stage consists of two steps. Firstly, the learners watch two other short extracts from the BBC episode 2 (Giedroyc & Dickens, 2007) depicting Oliver working for a funeral parlor to examine whether their pre-stage predictions were correct. Then, they try to complete the missing words of a short summary of the episode they just watched, a task demanding *global comprehension* abilities. In addition, the *Post* phase is based on a critical-thinking writing task that fulfills the perception of *Psycho-narratology* (Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003), namely their ability to sympathize with the characters of a novel. For this purpose they are asked to describe orally two of the novel’s characters, participating in the extracts they have just watched. Finally, the *follow-up* stage is writing-oriented. It is also a socially and historically-oriented phase, since they need to read the diary of a child worker, delve into the notion of child labor during the Victorian Era and then prepare their own diary entry, pretending to be one of those children.

Lesson 3 is based on the musical “Oliver Twist” (Reed & Bart, 1968). The *Warm-up* stage revises some of the information learned about the novel in the previous lesson. In the *Pre* stage students watch a scene from the musical with the sound off and engage in a *multiple interpretations task*⁴, as they need to complete some speech bubbles in a task sheet, using their imagination. The following *While* stage is completed in two steps. Initially, the learners watch the scene displayed in the pre phase with the sound on to verify their predictions. Afterwards, they watch another short extract⁵ from the musical and try to critically reflect on some questions included in a task sheet. Nevertheless, learners are more likely to enjoy the task of the *post* stage, as they are asked not only to offer an alternative ending of the scene between Oliver and Mr. Bumble but also act it out in front of the classroom.

All in all, the Oliver Twist WebQuest is a motivating experience which successfully integrates technology in a teaching

⁴. They watch a scene from the musical with the sound off and complete some speech bubbles which according to Brown (1999), allow multiple interpretations.

⁵ It is the famous scene in which Oliver Twist has the audacity to ask Mr. Bumble for more food (available at this [link](#)). The emotional power of the scene aims to realize Kim’s claim (2003:6) that “*understanding is never complete until one can actually experience or imagine what it is like being one of the characters*”.

context which prioritizes the “*washback effect*” (Zerkowitz, 2007).

5. Suggestions for the use of WebQuests

As with all computer-mediated teaching tools, ELT instructors need to keep in mind the following suggestions when using WebQuests in their classrooms (Lipscomb, 2003):

1. The topic of the WebQuest must be chosen carefully to suit learners’ age, needs and interest.
2. The WebQuest should be designed appropriately and supplemented with all the necessary material to facilitate students’ learning efforts. It is extremely important that the WebQuest is both alluring and easy to access and navigate.
3. Teachers need to be aware of their students’ familiarity with technology. This teaching tool can become useless if students do not know how to surf the internet or if they do not have a domestic internet connection.
4. The availability of computers in the classroom and a wifi internet access are prerequisite for the realization of a WebQuest-based series of lessons.
5. Students need to be aware of their roles and obligations for each task. WebQuests are highly collaborative and interactive, so if a student decides to remain inactive

during a task, this can jeopardize its successful completion.

6. As WebQuests are time-consuming, teachers must be prepared to spend additional teaching time.

7. Learners, especially young ones, must be constantly reminded that WebQuests are not some sort of computer game, but an alternative teaching method. It would be wise then if teachers included some type of assessment and informed their students about it.

8. Teachers should keep in mind that computers and internet access occasionally fail, so they need to have supplementary material available to avoid the inconvenience of not having anything to teach.

6. Concluding Remarks

The introduction of a WebQuest-based lesson is undoubtedly an innovative way of bringing learners into contact with the social dimension of English (Sen & Neufeld, 2006), thus allowing them to appraise language as communication. Nevertheless, WebQuests are also more time-consuming, demanding and unfamiliar to most students, so teachers need to be vigilant facilitators of learner’s attempts.

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